

Fragrant Tea

By William Grant

There was a time when rose connoisseurs grew Tea roses. Not Hybrid Teas, which are everywhere these days, but the distinctive, different from most other kinds, what once were called the Tea-Scented China roses.

I used 'connoisseurs' on purpose, as when the Teas were introduced to England in the late 18th century only those who had greenhouses and conservatories were able to grow a full range of them. Some were very shy of cold weather, and most cannot stand a persistent, hard frost. They do well in southern parts of the England or in sheltered areas.

Now that there is renewed interest in them – a wonderful book written by six ladies from South Australia has just been published – a new generation of rosarians may want to introduce them to their gardens. In warmer areas, of course.

Years ago when I ordered my first ones from Peter Beales in the UK (I could not find any U.S. nursery that had the ones I wanted), I quickly found they loved my climate (central coast California), and they have thrived ever since.

However, if I had believed the famed hybridizer Jack Harkness in 1978 (I admired him in spite of his focus on Hybrid Teas), I should never have attempted to grow them.

First, he offers his readers this quote from his grandfather John: 'If the Rose be the queen of flowers, the Tea-scented Rose may be regarded the queen of queens, for undoubtedly the "Teas", as they are familiarly called, are in refinement and delicate beauty superior to their robust and more highly coloured relatives'.

As soon as that is out of his mouth, he states, 'The Teas which survived for my eyes to see had little in the way of growth or flowers to compel one to take up a spade and go planting'. Then he parades a long litany of their failings, and says, 'I have no heart to record their swan song'.

By 1845 there were nearly 300 varieties catalogued, and the high point of Tea hybridization was still ahead. Looking at all the ones I have photographed and listed, I would say the highest point of their popularity was just before the WWI. The remarks of T.W. Sanders in 1899 in his *Cultivated Roses* mirrors the high regard the Teas had at that time: 'Exquisite in the delicacy, variety, and superb loveliness of the tints of their beautiful blooms; unspeakably delicious in their fragrance; invaluable for the freedom with which they flower, and for the long duration of their flowering period, they are

unquestionably the finest class of roses we have in cultivation at the present day'.

The Teas are still with us – some of us, some of them, in some places. And nurseryman Peter Beales still offers them – there are 57 listed in his latest catalogue, both shrub and climbing forms. Much of his sales are for overseas customers.

What has always set them apart is their different, mixed fragrance; I have always said they smell like tea, something I drink every day. A recent article in the *Daily Telegraph* confirms this. 'A French team has now traced the DNA change that gives the blossoms of some roses the scent of a newly opened packet of tea'. Another difference is a set of colours that most other kinds do not have. The colour spectrum includes white and cream, pink, red, yellow, buff and apricot, deep pink or copper. In addition, they have a wide variety of flower forms: cupped, globular, imbricated, quartered, confused central knot, and many with irregular petal arrangements.

Some gardeners do not like their nodding heads. There are low-growing shrubs and spectacular climbers; at least in my garden they never, never stop blooming.

In Western Australia, where they thrive, the six authors spent ten years investigating them, growing them, and evaluating both the good and the weak. They are fondly called the Tea Bags: Lynne Chapman, Noelene Drage, Di Durston, Jenny Jones, Hillary Merrifield, and Billy West. *

'Descriptions are first-hand and not just a repetition of what has been said before', they say in their introduction. That is a telling remark because there has been enormous confusion over the years about their identification. In fact the ladies have a section called 'Fellow Travellers and Impostors'.

The Teas' greatest attribute is their reblooming nature. My 'Madame de Tartas' (1859 - semi-globular form, soft rose-pink and carmine, 40-50 petals) is full of flowers as I write this during the summer. It will be blooming at Christmas. May I say that the Hybrid Teas simply do not match them in repeat bloom regardless of what the catalogues or Harkness says.

Harkness does list the early and best ones, all of which are still available. 'Adam' from 1833, introduced by a man by that name of Rheims, attracted a lot of attention when it appeared. The ladies do not think the one grown in Australia today is the original rose! And I thought the one I had matched the description perfectly.

Billy West states that 'Information widely accepted as factual because it came from impeccable sources turned out to be myth. We were faced with the decision to ignore the evidence our research was turning up and paper over the cracks, or to keep searching for answers and hope to find our way through these Chinese whispers'.

Such things add to the mystery and romance of rose history. If you could eavesdrop at rose meetings and especially at international conferences you would be struck how much disagreement is expressed, but no one for a moment is really disturbed by this. During every trip to Australia I hear the same argument: 'Archiduc Joseph' (1892) is exactly the same as 'Monsieur Tillier' (1891), both from France. I grow the latter and have given up participating in the debate.

'Devoniensis' (1841) has two forms, the shrub and the climbing sport. The latter, fully open on a warm day, produces hundreds of very fragrant, plump, urn-shaped ivory blooms, with an occasional pink blush in the centre. In the garden of my friends in Adelaide the perfume is strong three metres away.

'Alexander Hill Gray' (1911) was named for a real rose enthusiast who moved from Scotland to Bath so he could grow Teas. It has a deep yellow center with the outer petals turning white in hot weather. It has few prickles, and its new growth is brightly red. I saw it first in Bermuda, where there is a marvelous collection of the Teas, some of them called 'mystery roses' by Peter Harkness, the brother of Jack.

'General Schablikine' (1879) does very well in my friend Odile Masquelier's garden in Lyon and in the beautiful garden at Ninfa below Rome. (My grandfather once said that if I ever travelled I should see Naples before I died. I would revise that suggestion and replace it with Ninfa, one of the most magical gardens in the world.) It was known as an exhibition Tea for its strong canes, the full dark pink, shallow, silky blooms, which can cover the vigorous bush.

Jack Harkness actually recommends the climbing form of 'Lady Hillingdon' (1917) because it survives frosty weather. The golden petals open to a nodding, large flower with a strong tea fragrance. At a meeting of the Heritage Roses Australia in Sydney years ago, an elderly gentleman, when he saw the slide of it on the screen, said, in a loud voice, something that shocked a lot of the audience.

He said he had heard the remark in England, but I have been unable to find any hard evidence. The quote has made the rounds for years. Supposedly Lady Hillingdon wrote or said that when women marry and worry about the wedding night, they should simply 'close their eyes and think of England'. My friend's story was much more explicit – thus creating a stir at an otherwise solemn meeting of rosarians. And as one critic said, 'The origins are lost in the mist of English erotic history'.

One of the largest cemeteries in the world, Rookwood, is in Sydney, where more than a million people are buried. I have found many plants of 'Lady Hillingdon' among the ocean of tombstones. Most of them were planted a half century ago by relatives of the departed.

One of my favourites, which has climbed up ten feet in a madrone tree, is 'Souvenir de Madame Léonie Viennot' (1897), a vigorous climber with gorgeous, new red-brown foliage. It is one of the first to bloom in our late winter and produces large, blowsy pink/yellow/pale apricot flowers.

There are always dissenting views of the same rose not doubt caused by different soil, climate, and care. A favourite of many is 'Catherine Mermet', pale pink, large globular blooms. One writer says it is 'practically useless in the open garden' while another remarks 'a glorious flower'.

'Hume's Blush Tea-Scented China' was named for Lady Amelia Hume. It was introduced to England in 1808 from the Fan Tee Nurseries in Canton. I would risk stating that most of the Teas are named for women, especially the long list which starts with Madame. The rules of the game in naming roses require as short a title as possible. It would no longer be acceptable to offer a rose with the name 'Mme La Princesse de Bessaraba de Brancovan' (1890).

One of the more interesting stories about Teas is concerned with 'Mrs. B. R. Cant' (1901), a lovely, reliable, deep rose, fragrant shrub (a rare climbing form also). Benjamin Revett Cant had a most successful nursery in the 1880s and 1890s in Colchester. His nephew, Frank Cant, opened his own nursery and a rivalry lasted for years among the relatives, who finally made up in 1967 and combined forces for Cants of Colchester, which is still thriving. Alas, Benjamin died before his most famous rose was released to the world.

While visiting a recently burned out home in nearby Santa Cruz, I saw the remains of a small tower on which a rose had been growing. I took cuttings (when no one was looking) and was able to root them. Later I learned I had a beautiful, vigorous, fragrant yellow Tea rose which actually does best in hot weather – 'Etoile de Lyon' (1881).

'Noella Nabonnand' is a spectacularly beautiful climber with velvety, crimson red, fragrant blooms. I mention it here because the Nabonnand name is so closely associated with Teas. A family firm lasted for years on the Riviera and produced a very long list of roses, many of them Teas and Noisettes that are still available today.

While walking in the large rose garden at Tete d'Or in Lyon a few years back I noted a small, undistinguished bush marked 'Sombreuil', with a plate marked 1850 and the hybridizer's name, Robert. My rose by that name spreads itself all over the railings on my deck. I began a search for the 'real' rose which has still raged (I mean raged) as there are two look-alikes offered by American nurseries. Tete d'Or has recently taken cuttings of their rose and new plants are now in the garden. I can hardly wait to see them.

One final example of the wide variety of colours, shapes, and origins of these roses: 'Topsy Imperial Concubine' brought from China by the eminent rosarian, Hazel LeRougetel, after her visit there in 1981. It has a lovely, large pink, fragrant blossom, which is quite recurrent. No one hearing that title can fail to wonder why it received its name.

With global warming on the increase, it may not be too long before one can grow these remarkable roses where they have never thrived before.

(Ed. Note: This article first appeared in the Fall, 2008 issue of *Hortus*; the spelling and punctuation conform to the English style and have not been changed. The author is the renowned author, photographer, raconteur, and rosarian Bill Grant who has been retired for 27 years, grows mostly climbers on a half-acre of land and grows Australian companion plants to bloom in winter as counterpoints to the roses. He regards growing up in Los Angeles in the 1930's as a blessing when even his mother's Hybrid Teas were free of all diseases.)

**Tea Roses: Old Roses for Warm Gardens*. By Lynne Chapman, Noelene Drage, Di Durston, Jenny Jones, Hillary Merrifield, & Billy West. (Australia: Rosenberg Publishing Pty Ltd, 2008). Available from Ashdown Roses (www.ashdownroses.com).